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ABSTRACT

Procedures used in foreign language teaching are discussed from the point of view of developing communicative strategies in students. Literature on communicative competence is reviewed and the implications for foreign language instruction are discussed. It is shown that: (1) from the very beginning of language instruction, the classroom setting, exercises, language activities, and tests should lead toward the objective of attainment of communicative competence; and (2) teaching methods must take into consideration sociolinguistic factors. In this context, an English teaching situation in Polish secondary schools is described and its inadequacies, especially in the area of grammar instruction, are indicated. It is noted that the teaching techniques used do not lead to a functional knowledge of grammar and so do not result in the development of communication skills. Therefore, a description is provided of a sequence of exercises consisting of four phases that aim at a functional mastery of a grammatical item. In connection with grammar exercises the problems of error correction and testing are dealt with. Finally it is observed that the teacher's most important task is to get students to talk and that this objective must be central in all classroom activities. (Author/AMH)

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DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES AND GRAMMAR EXERCISES[1]

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Language is the most powerful medium of communication, and serves different purposes in everyday life. It is not just a verbal code, but a means of interacting with other people which enables us to exchange ideas, to obtain what we need as well as understand and fulfill someone else's needs expressed through it. Communication via language presupposes speaking, which implies activating what we know, namely knowledge of vocabulary, control of grammatical structures and the ability to differentiate between sounds. Furthermore, it includes understanding special meanings that arise from situational contexts. Communication refers to certain linguistic and non-linguistic components of meanings such as tone and voice qualities, facial expression and knowledge of social rules and attitudes to avoid misunderstanding.

We are all aware of the fact that while acquiring a native language a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical but also as appropriate for a given situational context as there exist rules of use without which rules of grammar would be useless (cf. Hymes 1972:277-278). The knowledge of these rules which enable a speaker of a language to understand a message or get the message across in a real-life situation is referred to as communicative competence.

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Acquiring communicative competence is part of one's maturational development as far as one's native language is concerned and it is intuitive rather than conscious. It is different, however, with foreign language learning, which is not just a matter of acquiring a code whose rules permit us to construct utterances but also involves learning the ability to use these utterances to carry out communicative acts in a way which insures successful communication.

Recent studies in sociolinguistics and communicative competence which have stressed the importance of exchanging ideas and information as both the means and goals of language learning, have resulted in many changes that have taken place in foreign language instruction. Since communication has been proclaimed one of the major goals of foreign language study, the emphasis has been put on developing communication skills in the learning process.

It is evident from previous experience in language teaching that although the students were able to speak, or rather to perform well in the classroom, they were unable to perform, or rather to communicate, in a real communication situation because they lacked opportunities to use the language freely; they were not prepared to encounter such situations. Learning a language is a difficult and time-consuming task, but learning the language for communicative purposes, as it is normally used, is even more difficult, especially when we learn a foreign language in an artificial, classroom setting.

We have to remember that the problem of foreign language learning, from a psychological point of view, is completely different from the situation of learning a language in a country where it is spoken. Thus, learners of English in Poland, and in many other countries where it is taught as a foreign language, have no (or very few) opportunities to use the language for any purposes at all outside the classroom, and have practically no opportunity to test their hypotheses about the language as a possible means of communication. Such a situation is very dangerous for motivational reasons, as students cannot see any practical application of what they learn and therefore it imposes special requirements upon language teachers, whose task is to make their students want to say something in the language. If we want to teach our students to speak we must consider their attitudes, since they must have something to talk about and must be interested in communicating their ideas to someone.

From the very beginning of foreign language instruction there must be a focus on teaching and learning a language for communication and therefore as has been rightly pointed out by Westphal (1976:34), the students must be provided with experiences that approximate to real communication. What does this mean? First of all, real communication takes place within a rich context of non-verbal and situational cues which add a lot to the interaction, whereas in the classroom context language is devoid of all such cues. Secondly, people who communicate have a real need to do so, while students in the classroom actually have no reason for doing so. What follows, success or

failure is measured not in terms of achieving some defined goal, but in terms of satisfying the requirements of the teacher.[2] It is the teacher's task, and not an easy one, to motivate his students to communicate within the linguistic skills they have at their disposal, no matter how limited they are. Students have to be encouraged to use everything they know of the language and any means at their disposal to get their meanings across. As W. Rivers (1972:27) points out in her well known article "Talking off the tops of their heads," we must work out situations from the very onset of instruction, where the student is on his own, trying to use language for its natural purposes as establishing social relations or giving information, among other things. Also, from the very beginning, students should be made aware of the factor of social acceptability of language use, which accounts for successful communication. They should be taught to recognize situations and circumstances in which different kinds of language are appropriate, and should be given practice in using proper linguistic forms according to the situation. This is extremely important, because, as Palmer (1970:55-56) points out, a formally correct sentence used in a wrong context may create a problem. Students must get used to thinking about the possible social consequences of what they say because the ability to interact is also thought of in terms of the social rules of language use.[3] It may help students to communicate in the foreign language if they are made aware of what they

already know about communication process in their native language. We must also remember that, at least in the case of Polish learners of English, it is not necessary to learn the social rules of language use and the rules of conversation structure from the very beginning as there is a positive transfer from what the learner knows about communication strategies in his mother tongue.

In oral communication, as has already been stressed, both linguistic and extralinguistic factors, such as the social roles of the participants, the place and the time of the communication act, must be taken into consideration as they determine to a large extent the appropriateness of any message and contribute to the success of an interaction.

As speech is full of "redundancies," the more tolerant we are of our students' performance, the more willing they will be to communicate. It is the fact now that very often students remain silent because very soon they realise that their teachers are interested in how they say things and not in what they have to say. It is extremely easy to inhibit students in their efforts to use the language. Therefore, if the development of communicative skills is the goal of classroom instruction, language teachers must have a high tolerance of errors. Consequently, everything that our students have to say should be treated with respect and attention, or otherwise they will remain silent. This problem, however, will be dealt with later in this paper.

From what has been said up to now the conclusion is that in order to develop the ability to communicate in a classroom

setting, the atmosphere, the exercises, and all the activities the students engage in, as well as the tests, should reflect this objective. The following conditions are necessary for the development of communicative skills (after Schultz 1976):

1. students need authentic meaningful situations in which to practice the language;
2. they need the motivation to express themselves;
3. they need freedom and encouragement to use language to create and experiment linguistically in a classroom environment, without the fear of ridicule; and they must be rewarded for the content of what they say rather than discouraged by the teacher's reaction to their errors.

Although nowadays the emphasis is on the need for providing students from the earliest stages with a great deal of practice in using language for its natural uses, that is practice in interaction, further consideration will be given to an intermediate level of language instruction, which in Poland is the second and third year of English, taught to an age range of 16-17. It has to be explained here that languages, English, German, or French, are taught regularly in Polish secondary schools, and English is taken up by a lot of students, who are offered four 45-minute periods weekly during the first two years of instruction, and three such periods during the third and fourth years. It has also to be added that in most cases languages are taught by Polish teachers, the graduates of modern language departments at Polish universities; and that

the number of pupils in each class varies from 30 to 40, which has an influence on the learning-teaching process. Only in some schools are large classes divided into smaller groups which certainly makes the teaching task easier.

The intermediate level of language instruction has been chosen deliberately as at this level the student should already be acquainted with the fundamentals of the system of English as well as some basic vocabulary, which enables him to create sentences in it.

We can talk about communication in the EFL classroom when the students can go beyond memorized material, consequently teaching strategies are evaluated from the viewpoint of their effectiveness in furthering the ability to communicate. Learning to speak, the students have to master not only the necessary vocabulary and grammatical structures together with the rules governing their usage but also social rules of language use, in order to support their efforts before they are asked to communicate. Therefore they should be presented with a language system in such a way as to enable them to use it according to the situation requirements; consequently classroom techniques and procedures should be directed towards that goal. The same must be said about communication activities which should not be supplementary but should spring naturally and inevitably from the types of activities engaged in for "skill-getting." As success in language depends on the ability to transfer known grammatical forms and vocabulary to new combinations used to express meanings, teachers must take steps

to teach the students to transfer what they have learned to other contexts.

Although some methodologists (e.g. Zelson 1976:207) indicate that "skill-using" receives a much lower priority than "skill-getting" it is the writer's opinion, that in many countries where English is taught as a foreign language, the types of activities engaged in for "skill-getting" do not actually lead to functional mastery of a given language element and thus do not result in the development of communicative skills.

It has been observed by the writer during her visits at secondary schools in Poznan, that most of the teachers of English very seldom go beyond the activities of the mechanical or meaningful drill type which constitute the major part of many lessons. During the lesson the pupils are usually presented with a given language element first in pattern practice, then a dialogue, and finally a written text. Then they are asked to reproduce the dialogues word for word, usually without introducing any changes, or to reproduce sentences as presented in the pattern practice (generally with the teacher asking a question and the pupil responding). They also do some exercises from the textbook used which most often are of the following types:[4]

I. Complete the following as in the example:

Example: Can Peter swim, Robert?
Of course he can. I taught him to swim some time ago.

Then follows the exercise:

Can Philip dance, Dora?

Of course . . . . . .

II. Answer the questions (see Pattern Practice):

a) What did Mrs. Wilson tell Robert to do?

b) What did Susan tell Peter to do? etc.

When we refer to the Pattern Practice mentioned we will find the following:

Robert's jacket is dirty. Mrs. Wilson told him to take it to the cleaner's, etc.

III. Complete the following as in the example:

Example: Mrs. Wilson has bought a new hat lately.

Exercise: Robert . . . . a good book . . . . (read).

Susan . . . . a new record . . . .(buy).

IV. Complete the following as in the examples (see the pictures):

Example: Is there anything in the shopping bag?

(a picture shown)

Yes, there are some apples in it (a picture).

V. Complete as in the example using the following verbs: to write, to paint, to produce, to publish, etc.

Example: The new school play was produced by Miss Dean.

Exercise: "Hamlet" . . . . .

VI. Answer the questions:

1. What time did you get up this morning?

2. When did you have your first English lesson?

Some teachers use additional exercises from Living English Structure by W. S. Allen, but again these are of a purely mechanical type, such as, e.g., putting the verb into the present perfect continuous, changing from present simple into past simple, changing statements into questions, or supplying the correct tense form, all of which are not very challenging, as sometimes they do not require any effort on the part of the pupils. The main disadvantage of the exercises described here as well as the ones mentioned above is that they consist mainly of sentences taken out of context and therefore they do not help much in connecting formal aspects of a given language element with its semantic aspect and moreover, when the grammatical structures are applied to everyday situation they result in sentences which sound clumsy and artificial; and the students often fail in their attempts to convey meanings. Another serious drawback is that they do not practice the choice between different structures and that the pupils cannot see what consequences follow if they use something else instead of the structure required by the context provided.

It has been pointed out that the present system of teaching grammar and the types of exercises used by teachers in Poland do not lead to a functional knowledge of grammar and thus do not result in the development of communication skills. It follows, then, that all language exercises sould be organized in a way which would help the students to perceive the communicative functions of the language elements being practiced. Thus, the applicability of the grammatical concepts needs to be

demonstrated in contexts they are typically used in so that the students can relate them to their personal experience.

If the students are to be taught to communicate, they must know something about grammatical concepts and the meanings they convey. Since the development of functional, and not necessarily linguistically perfect performance skills is to be the main goal of foreign language instruction, what we need is a sequence of exercises which would help in achieving this particular goal. Until recently the main function of exercises has been habit formation understood as one of the most important functions in the whole language learning process. Drills, in which there was no association between the formal aspect and the meaning of a given language element were used to create habits. These were so-called "focus-away" exercises with the attention of the students focused on something other than the problem itself (Lado 1964). It was assumed that there would be a direct, automatic transfer from drills to real-life situations which could enable the students to use the language actively in new situations. Of course, it is obvious now that such transfer seldom takes place automatically and that the teacher is responsible for helping his students to use the transfer by providing them with situations approximating to real-life conditions and giving them opportunities to use the language in order to express the necessary meanings.

Thus, the function of grammar exercises should be to make the grammatical concepts and principles clear as they should lead to getting of a clear understanding of a concept and then

of the principle. They should also provide the students with knowledge of the implications of using a given structure in certain situational contexts. Only after this stage has been reached, can the students be given intensified practice in, for instance, the application, internalization, and contextualization of a given rule. The students should never be asked to produce their own utterances until they are fully aware of what is meant and expressed by a given grammatical item or otherwise "induced errors" may occur, which result from the classroom context.[5]

Therefore, the first phase in the sequence of grammar exercises,[6] which has been worked out at the Institute of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, should be the reception, or recognition phase where the teacher should concentrate on his students' understanding and acquisition of concepts prior to practice. What is needed at this point is intensive practice in decoding messages in the foreign language. In order to help the students perceive and internalize rules, the grammatical structures have to be presented in some typical contexts of their usage; and the students may be asked to explain why a given grammatical feature is used. They can also have some practice in discriminating between correct and erroneous forms and make comments upon possible implications. It seems worthwhile to prolong this particular phase for obvious reasons. First of all, we should be realistic enough not to expect our students to develop native-like fluency in spoken English; and secondly, taking into consideration the teaching-

learning circumstances, it is much easier to develop receptive skills more extensively, especially listening comprehension which helps the students to anticipate.

After this stage the students need practice in activating what they have learned in order to increase their fluency in using the language. They do this during the "application of the rule" phase (pseudo-communication - cf. Rivers 1973:25) where they are encouraged to make decisions about applying or not applying a given rule, or using or not using a certain structure. They have to make these decisions after analysing contexts they are provided with. It is advisable to relate all the contexts or situations to the students' experience which makes them more interested in participating in the classroom activities, and what is more, the structures used receive some definite meanings. When given such problem-solving exercises the students can test hypotheses concerning the use of a given structure. What is meant here are mostly contrastive exercises where a choice is made from at least two possibilities (contextual multiple choice exercises, also requiring the use of some sociolinguistic rules), as well as translation exercises which help in establishing contrast between a foreign and a native language. Of course all the exercises employed here should be meaningful and require the conscious attention of the students and the use of particular structures has to be watched carefully by the teacher.

The question now arises whether after the two stages the students would be able to engage in spontaneous communication

activating what has been learned or rather what should have been learned. It seems advisable to add another phase, a sort of link between grammatical exercises and communication, which in a still semi-productive way would lead towards true communication. What might be used here is a situational exercise where the students' task is not to choose a structure, because they know in advance which structure is to be used, but instead they have to choose lexical items and use them together with the relevant structure in the right context. Such an exercise is a difficult one as it requires a clear understanding of a given situation in order to react properly. Exercises suggested by J. Kettering (1975) represent this kind of activity.

The last phase in the sequence would be that of contextualization where the students engage in spontaneous communication trying to use the structures they have practiced so far. The teacher has practically no control over the students' responses here and they are encouraged to experiment with what they know about the language. Of course, communicative activities should naturally follow from the previous phases or otherwise the students would think about "skill-getting" and "skill-using" activities as two different things and while speaking they would probably neglect all that they have learned before. During this phase the students should activate their knowledge of some formal aspects of language while acting in some situations which have been vaguely outlined, or participating in conversations on set topics whose framework has been provided. Such activities present an intellectual challenge to the students

who get satisfaction from being able to engage in a conversation. All the students' attempts at speaking should be based on some models, and they should be prepared lexically and grammatically.

In the development of the productive skills in the phase of communication the criterion of getting one's meaning across should be treated as deciding about success or failure and as more important than the criterion of complete linguistic correctness. Strict demands for grammatical accuracy seem to be not only unrealistic but potentially harmful in learning a foreign language in a classroom setting. Aiming at grammatical perfection and at correctness from the very beginning is, from the point of view of language teaching conditions, too high a demand. On the other hand, for motivational reasons, we should concentrate upon the ability to express meanings in an understandable but not necessarily perfect way which seems to be a reasonable and realistic goal. Of course this does not mean that students can attain the minimum communicative skill (the ability to get one's meanings across) without any grammatical correctness. They must be able to make themselves understood in the language and therefore all errors that hinder communication or obscure the message should be dealt with by the teacher.

In dealing with errors it is necessary to remember that correcting the wrong thing, or the right thing for the wrong reason, or not correcting enough, can easily make the matters worse. Therefore the teacher must always be sure of the meanings his students want to convey before he makes any corrections (Stenson 1974).

It is suggested by some authors (Holley and King 1974) that accepted methods of error correction may contribute to poor student performance and often make him doubtful about his grammar and his ability to communicate alike. Thus student communication in the foreign language may be actively discouraged by the instructor who insists upon grammatical accuracy. Recent linguistic data support the thesis that grammatical perfection is unnecessary and even inadvisable and that teachers have unreasonably high demands. Holley and King (1974) propose modifications of the techniques of error correction which do not confuse students and altogether give better results. They suggest (1974:86), that among others, the instructor is to allow a student to complete his statement, even incorrect, without interruption; and that he is asked to model any incorrect student response substituting the correct form where necessary, but he is not to draw attention to the correction in any other way. The point is that the students do not profit much from correcting what has not yet become an active part of their repertoire, and, what is even more important, normal corrective procedures confuse them. It is advisable, however, to note the kinds of errors that students usually make and comment upon them on a suitable occasion later on. It seems justified to refer at this point to Marina Burt's (1975) distinction between global and local errors, based on the communicative importance of errors, whereby she suggests that from a viewpoint of successful communication it is not

necessary to correct all errors. It is more important to correct only those errors that significantly hinder communication, that is global errors, and accordingly a global grammar must receive priority (Burt 1975:56). It is high time that students be praised for what they have to say in a foreign language which only then becomes a real medium of communication. Once they gain confidence in being able to express themselves and to convey messages, they are likely to pay more attention to how they say it. Summing up, if we want our students to develop communicative skills, demands for grammatical accuracy are not only unrealistic but also impede the learning of a foreign language.

In dealing with communicative skills we should not forget about testing which is an extremely important activity in the eyes of the students as a measure of their success or failure. If the assumption of the course is that students should be able to communicate, tests which evaluate their ability to do so must be administered. When preparing such tests the teacher should take into consideration that they must be perceived as a truly communicative task. The students must feel that they are performing a real communicative activity and that their performance would be assessed in terms of their success in the task, instead of counting the individual errors made by them. Such tests have a very motivational value as the students get the necessary feedback as far as their abilities are concerned. Therefore such tests, as for example, changing from active into passive, or from affirmative into negative or questions, do not

only tell us very little about the students' ability to use the language, but also do not present any challenge to the student, who can perform such tasks very well but still be unable to use the language as a means of communication. The situation changes, however, when they are asked to say something about thier activities the day before (even with the key words provided), or things they would have done if they had had time, or even to talk about what they have read or have heard. Such activities gain authenticity as the students are personally involved. Of course, from the viewpoint of a language teacher, such tests do not only provide him with information about his students' ability to communicate but also with information about their possible problems and weaknesses and thus help in working out remedial procedures.

Summing up all the above remarks it has to be stressed once again that if we aim at developing the communicative strategies of our students, all the activities they engage in, all the teaching procedures, classroom atmosphere and testing procedures should gradually lead to that particular goal. Grammar exercises are of special value here as they prepare the necessary background for further speaking attempts. It has to be remembered, however, that the "skill-getting" and "skill-using" activities should be simultaneously developed from the very beginning of language instruction. As far as sociolinguistics is concerned, and especially the rules of interaction, it is the writer's conviction that the students should be aware of both the linguistic and paralinguistic

factors which determine the appropriateness of a message, but they should use one standard version, because actually styles and registers are a matter of vocabulary rather than grammar. The most important task at the moment is to make them want to talk and therefore we should back up any efforts to make them do so.

The foreign language classroom should be treated as an opportunity to learn a language but also as a place where one can learn new and interesting facts and also exchange views and ideas on different subjects using English. Only then does it become a real medium of communication, and this is what we are aiming at.

NOTES

1. Paper read at the 10th International Conference of IATEFL, London, April 1978. I am indebted to Dr. W. Marton for his careful reading and comments on the earlier version of the paper.
2. For a more detailed discussion of the problem see Westphal (1976:35).
3. Cf. Paulston (1974) and Finocchiaro (1977).
4. All the examples taken from Smolska and Zawadzka (1968; 1969).
5. For a discussion of "induced errors" see Stenson (1974).
6. See Marton (1974:85-93).

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